Rivaldo not a WC concern

AFP, *Rio de Janeiro*

Brazilian star Rivaldo, who suffered a knee injury moments before scoring Barcelona's goal in the defeat at Celta Vigo at the weekend, is almost certain to go to the World Cup, according to the Brazilian team doctor.

Jose Luis Runco said there was little risk Rivaldo would not be going to the May 31 to June 30 football showcase event and that he would be available for Brazil against a Catalonia XI on May 18.

"They are creating a monster, inventing a problem where none exists," Runco told the Brazilian

RIVALDO

press on rumours about the severity of the 1999 World Player of the Year's injury, and adding there had been confusion about which knee had been affected.

"At the moment there is enough time for him to recover and be available for Brazil in Barcelona," Runco added.

According to Runco, at the start of the year, Rivaldo had ligament problems in his left knee, which almost led to an operation, but the injury at the weekend was to the right knee.

Runco said Rivaldo had been in contact with him by telephone since the Celta game and Rivaldo had explained to him in detail how the problem was progressing.

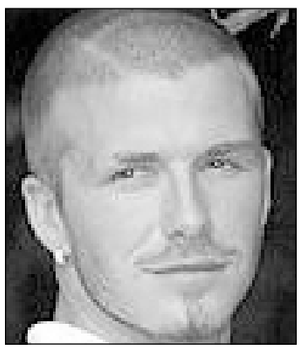
Runco added Rivaldo was an athlete, not a bureaucrat and therefore there were always risks of physical injury. Rivaldo got hurt just before his 89th minute goal in their 2-1 defeat at Celta on Saturday.

Beckham OK after accident

AFP, *London*

England football captain David Beckham escaped unharmed after his car was in a collision with another vehicle on a country road, newpapers reported Wednesday.

The Manchester United



DAVID BECKHAM

midfielder, who broke a bone in his foot in a challenge with Deportivo La Coruna's Argentine defender Aldo Duscher two weeks ago, was at the wheel of his powerful Mercedes 500 at the time of the crash, according to the Daily Mirror.

The Daily Mail said the car collided with a Ford Focus driven by an off-duty policeman on a "blind corner" close to Beckham's home in Hertfordshire, central England, last Thursday.

The footballer's leg is currently in plaster but he was lawfully driving the car because it is an automatic.

The Daily Mail said the 26-year-old footballer's car suffered thousands of pounds (dollars, euros) of damage while the policeman's vehicle just sustained dents.

Beckham is facing a race against time to be fit in time for England's World up campaign in Japan and South Korea, which kicks off against Sweden on June 2.

FIFA approves Blatter decision to shelve audit

AFP, *Zurich*

FIFA's emergency committee has approved the decision of president Sepp Blatter to temporarily suspend an internal audit of finances, world football's governing body said in a statement on Wednesday.

The decision was taken by a majority decision, the statement added.

Blatter had initially agreed to an internal audit in July last year after the collapse of marketing company ISL/ISMM but on April 11 decided to put any such action on ice till the executive meeting on May 3.

Real conquer Nou Camp

UEFA CHAMPS LEAGUE

AFP, *Barcelona*

Zinedine Zidane repaid every euro of the world record transfer fee Real Madrid paid for him last summer when he opened the scoring for them in their 2-0 European Champions League semi-final first leg victory over Barcelona here on Tuesday.

England discard Steve McManaman scored the second in injury-time as Real did in European competition what they have been unable to do in the Spanish league since November 1983, and beat their bitter Catalan rivals in their Nou Camp stadium.

The two away goals makes the eight times European champions clear favourites to meet either Manchester United or Bayer Leverkusen in this year's final in Glasgow on May 15.

"It was a great game from both teams but it is too early to tell if we are through to the final as there is still another 90 minutes to play next week," commented Real coach Vicente Del Bosque diplomatically.

"Perhaps the difference between us and them was that we were better in the box.

"We kept worrying them with our quick counter-attacks down the wings even though they had more of the game," added Del Bosque who, in typical fashion, maintained his usual deadpan pose.

"As far as the historical aspect of the game is concerned, I wasn't thinking about what had gone on in the past. However, it will calm our nevres before we go to play Real Sociedad on Saturday."

Real Madrid are fighting not only for a ninth European crown but also a 29th Spanish title, and currently lie second in the Spanish first division.

By contrast Barcelona look set for a trophyless season and are not even guaranteed a place in the Champions League next term as they are currently one place outside the four qualifying spots.

"I'm not going to try and fool our fans. It is going to be very difficult to get anything from this tie, although anything is possible in football," said a stunned Rexach.

"Our obligation in Madrid is just to play as well as we can and not do anything that damages our image," added the former Barcelona player, whose future at the helm of the club must now be in severe jeopardy.

The vital goal which broke the deadlock in the Nou Camp came after 55 minutes when Zidane, who cost Real a world record 75.1 million euros when he moved from Italian club Juventus last summer, picked up a long ball from Raul close to the left-hand corner of the Barcelona area.

He had to evade the challenge of Dutch midfielder Philip Cocu and Barcelona goalkeeper Roberto Bonano, who came off his line in a bid to close down Zidane, but the Frenchman knew just what to do and chipped the ball over the advancing Argentine.

Bonano got his fingers to the ball but the light touch was not enough to stop it looping over his head and dropping into the goal, igniting wild celebrations among the 2,900 Madrid supporters who had managed to get their hands on the visitors' meagre ticket allocation.

By contrast, the 100,000 Barcelona supporters who had filled the Nou Camp to the rafters were stunned into silence.

Rexach almost immediately brought on his Brazilian striker Geovanni, in place of the Dutch defender Micheal Reiziger, and proceded to throw everything into attack.

Patrick Kluivert and Fabio Rochemback both went close in the closing stages of the game but to no avail and second half substitute McManaman, who had only been on the pitch 11 minutes, added to the scoreline a minute into injury time.

With the Catalans clearly demoralised at the prospect of a historic loss, Mcmanaman received an inch-perfect cross from Flavio Conceicao on the right edge of the box and Bonano found the ball out of reach for a second time on the night.

The game started at a predictably frantic pace and Barcelona took the game to the visitors from the whistle.

Kluivert had an early chance after seven minutes when he sidestepped Spanish international midfielder Ivan Helguera, only to blast the ball straight at Madrid goalkeeper Cesar Sanchez, who had an outstanding night to fully justify his continued inclusion ahead of Spanish international Iker Casillas.

Barcelona midfielder Luis Enrique was the first of six names to enter the book of the Swedish referee Anders Fisk, when he felled Real's Argentine international Santiago Solari after only 10 minutes of the game.

However, two minutes later, Luis Enrique nearly turned from villain to hero when he headed a Rochemback corner against the cross bar, the closest Barcelona came to scoring on what was to become a depressing night.

After the whistle, the Nou Camp rang out to the tune of thousands of Barcelona supporters demanding the resignation of club president Joan Gaspart, some of whom hurled objects at the director's box, which had housed various dignatories including the Barcelona mayor Joan Clos.

Around 200 Barcelona fans then surrounded Gaspart's car and jostled him as he tried to leave the stadium, before security staff intervened.

The return leg in Real Madrid's Santiago Bernabeu stadium will be on May 1.

PHOTO: INTERNET

REAL COOL! Real Madrid's England international Steve McManaman (R) chips the ball over Barcelona custodian Bonano to score his team's second goal at the Nou Camp in Barcelona on April 23.

Premiership

Magpies in Europe

Football

AFP, *London*

Alan Shearer scored twice to help Newcastle secure the point they needed for Champions League qualification with a 2-2 Premiership draw against Blackburn Rovers at Ewood Park on Tuesday.

Newcastle - who lead Chelsea by seven points with two matches remaining - will join Arsenal, Liverpool and Manchester United in the competition next season.

Meanwhile Fulham, who earlier Tuesday had announced a massive 23.3million pounds (33.8million dollars) loss, ended the day on a happier note by securing their Premiership survival with a 3-0 win over fellow strugglers Bolton.

Newcastle's result completed a remarkable transformation in the north-east club's fortunes since former England boss Bobby Robson took over at St James' Park in September 1999.

Back then United were looking at relegation but Robson's skill turned the club around and crucially his arrival sparked a return to form for fellow Newcastle native Shearer, who had been dropped by previous manager and former Holland star Ruud Gullit. "It's just marvellous," a delighted Robson told Sky Sports afterwards.

"But all these comebacks are not good for the heart, not at my age," joked the 69-year-old.

Asked what his hopes were for the club at the start of the season, Robson replied: "I thought we might finish eighth but fourth is unbelieveable."

All four goals at Ewood Park were scored by players appearing against their former clubs with former Blackburn forward Shearer twice levelling after one-time Newcastle favourites Keith Gillespie and Andy Cole had scored for Blackburn.

The match erupted into life just after the hour mark when Newcastle equalised.

Following a corner Peruvian winger Nolberto Solano drilled in a cross shot that Blackburn keeper Brad Friedel blocked.

But from the rebound Solano centred to leave former England striker Shearer with a routine 63rd minute tap-in from the edge of the six-yard box and his 201st Premiership goal.

That was the first of three goals in a frantic eight minute spell.

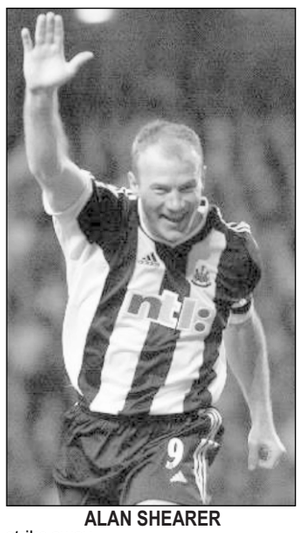
In the 67th minute Shearer's former England team-mate Cole just evaded the defence to get his outstretched leg onto a hopeful cross and volley home to make it 2-1 to Graeme Souness side.

However, four minutes later Shearer, the leading scorer in Premiership history, extended his record to 202 when he powered into the box and shot past United States keeper Friedel.

Blackburn took the lead against the run of play with Gillespie knocking a raking pass out of defence from Hakan Unsal into the path of Cole.

He then slipped the ball back into the path of Gillespie, who shot powerfully through the legs of goalkeeper Shay Given in the 28th minute.

Republic of Ireland keeper Given needed to be alert seven minutes later when international team-mate Damien Duff cut inside from the left wing and after a run into the area, shot powerfully only to see Given palm the



ALAN SHEARER

strike away.

There was a worrying moment in the second half when Blackburn's Lucas Neill appeared to swallow his tongue after falling awkwardly following a tackle by Newcastle's Laurent Robert.

However Neill appeared to recover to the relief of all concerned.

It was a more straightforward affair down in London at Craven Cottage.

A first-half strike from Danish star Bjarne Goldbaek and two in four second-half minutes from Frenchman Steve Marlet and Barry Hayles secured all three points for Jean Tigana's expensively assembled side.

Forgotten midfielder Goldbaek opened the scoring in the 42nd minute when following a poor punch at a corner from Bolton's Finland keeper Jussi Jaaskelainen he fired the ball in from 22 yards.

Then, in the 72nd minute, Fulham got the second they need to kill the game courtesy of a sublime effort from 11million pounds (15.95million dollars) substitute Marlet.

After good work by Hayles, the Frenchman's 16 yard curler gave Jaaskelainen no chance.

And four minutes later, when Steed Malbranque beat the Bolton offside trap, Hayles blasted the ball home from 12 yards.

Premiership's top six

English Premiership table after Tuesday's matches (played, won, drawn, lost, goals for, goals against, points):

*Relegated: Leicester, Derby

Arsenal	34	22	9	3	70	33	75
Liverpool	35	22	8	5	58	26	74
Man Utd	35	23	4	8	86	44	73
Newcastle	36	20	8	8	70	48	68
Chelsea	36	16	13	7	63	35	61
Leeds	36	16	12	8	51	37	60

Shearer having no second thoughts

AFP, *London*

Former England captain Alan Shearer ruled out a return to international football on Tuesday quashing rumours that he was prepared to do so.

The 31-year-old, whose only appearance at a World Cup finals was in 1998 where he was outshone by Michael Owen, made it clear after scoring twice in the 2-2 draw with Blackburn to take his Premiership total to 202 that there was no going back.

"I've already booked my summer holiday!" he joked.

"No seriously I've taken my decision and I won't be changing my mind.

"I will be there but only in spirit," he added.

Newcastle manager Bobby Robson supported his skipper.

"Alan has made his decision and he usually stands by it," said Robson, who guided England to two World Cup finals reaching the last eight in 1986 and the semi-finals in 1990.

"He has done his bit for England and now it's time for others to step forward and do the same thing," he added.

Pires' money on Arsenal

AFP, *London*

Arsenal's injured winger Robert Pires said he was sure Arsenal would finish the job of winning the English Premiership and FA Cup double this season.

The 29-year-old player is to have an operation on injured cruciate ligaments in his left knee in Marseille on Thursday and is hence out of Arsenal's plans and France's World Cup defence.

Pires, who has been voted the English Football Writers' Association player of the year, is expected to be out of action for around six months.

Arsenal, many people's favourites for the Premiership title, also have an FA Cup final place booked against Chelsea.

Pires said: "Of course it is frustrating to miss the end of the season because this one has been so exciting with Arsenal. But I am sure that my friends at the club are going to finish the job."

The winger will await specialist advice after his operation before deciding whether he can travel to Cardiff to watch the cup final on May 4, although he is likely to miss the FWA awards dinner two days beforehand.

Spain absorb 'Duel of the Century'

UEFA CHAMPS LEAGUE

AFP, *Madrid*

Real Madrid's momentous 2-0 victory over bitter rivals Barcelona in the European Champions League, in a match dubbed The Duel of the Century in Spain, predictably dominated national headlines on Wednesday.

There was no doubt who were the masters this time following Tuesday's semi-final, first leg clash at the Nou Camp.

The Spanish definitely wanted to read about football rather than finance, as even a major scandal concerning one of Spain's biggest banks was reduced to second billing behind descriptions of Madrid's goals from Zinedine Zidane and Steve McManaman.

The pair have as good as bought Real Madrid's ticket to the final in Glasgow on May 15, where they will face either Manchester United or Bayer Leverkusen.

Just like the country's 39 million inhabitants, nearly all the Spanish media is split into either Madrid and Barcelona fans, and it was not difficult to tell who supported which team on Wednesday.

"Madrid kill Barca," blasted the Madrid-based sports daily Marca, Spain's most widely read newspaper, referring to a pre-match comment of Barcelona coach Carles Rexach, who said the Catalans would run at the visitors until they died.

"It was more than just a victory, even if the game was without Puyol, without Rivaldo, and without Figo," added Marca triumphantly, hinting at the deep social divide that still persists between the Spanish capital and Catalonia.

"We didn't deserve this," exclaimed the Barcelona-based daily Sport on its front page, over a picture of an agonised Luis Enrique Martinez after one of his squandered efforts during a Barcelona-dominated first half.

For their part, while most people have already written off Barcelona's chances of getting to the final, Real Madrid's defenders were pleading for caution on Wednesday, knowing that they are in for a busy night when the two side's meet again in the return leg at Real's Santiago Bernabeu stadium on May 1.

They are certain to face a do-or-die onslaught from the likes of Patrick Kluivert and Fabio Rochemback, and perhaps even the former World Player of the Year Rivaldo who missed Tuesday's game with an injured knee.

"If we start thinking we are on our way to Glasgow then something bad could happen. I'm very happy the result but we have not won this tie yet and Barcelona could easily score in Madrid," commented Real's Spanish international defender Michel Salgado on Wednesday.

"You can never write off Barcelona, even in a situation like this," added Francisco Pavon.

"There is still nothing to celebrate yet, and 90 minutes still to go. We will have to play with the same effort and concentration in the Bernabeu as we did in Barcelona," chipped in the Brazilian defender Roberto Carlos.

The statistics show that Real had only five shots on target to Barcelona's 11 on Tuesday, but the important factor was that two of Real's found the net.

Steve McManaman's injury time strike for their second goal will give the eight-times European champions an added cushion next week, but could also have an effect far beyond the imminent encounter.

The English midfielder is a firm favourite with the Real faithful for his hard work and uncomplaining manner, added to his speed and flair down the right wing, but his recent dip in form had lead to speculation that he might be dispensed with during the summer.

However, even the Real Madrid president Florentino Perez, whose diplomatic manner masks a non-nonsense ruthless streak, may be reluctant to sell McManaman after a goal which will earn his a place in the history books in Real's centenary year.

"My goal was very important. It's not like scoring against any other team when you score against Barcelona," commented McManaman on Wednesday, with a knowing smile.

By contrast, while possibly securing his own immediate future, McManaman may have also hastened the demise of Rexach.

The likeable Catalan has hinted that he might resign at the end of the season, after feeling crushed under the pressure placed upon him as the Barcelona coach.

McManaman's goal, and the subsequent chants of "Rexach, go now," which echoed around the Nou Camp after the game could well have made up mind for him.

Scholl won't make it

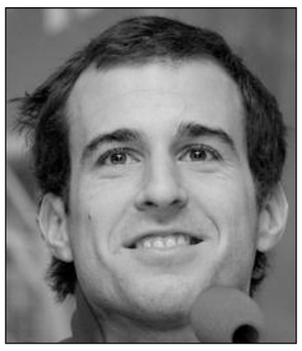
AFP, *Munich*

Bayern Munich midfielder Mehmet Scholl has ruled himself out of Germany's World Cup squad because of persistent injury problems, the German football federation confirmed on Tuesday.

A statement from the federation said 31-year-old Scholl had broken the news to national coach Rudi Voller in a meeting on Tuesday.

"Because of my state of health, I cannot help the German national team or Rudi Voller at the World Cup in South Korea and Japan. That's why I took this decision," Scholl said in the statement.

Scholl tore a groin muscle at the start of February and only returned to competitive action in Bayern's 3-0 win over Hertha Berlin on Saturday which drew stinging criticism from Voller, who said he should not have been risked in the match.



MEHMET SCHOLL

Voller said: "I hoped up until the last moment that Mehmet would be fit for the World Cup. He gave a detailed account of his situation during our meeting."

Scholl's absence will further hit Voller's hopes of taking the Germans a long way in the finals as he is facing an injury crisis among his creative midfielders.

Sebastian Deisler's participation in South Korea and Japan is already in doubt because of injury, Scholl's absence means the creative midfield role falls solely on the shoulders of Bayer Leverkusen midfielder Michael Ballack.

Scholl, who has never played in a World Cup finals as he was not selected for Germany's squad in 1994 or 1998, was one of Germany's rare success stories during their Euro 2000 flop in Belgium and The Netherlands.

Zen-Ruffinen stays firm

Football

AFP, *Zurich*

FIFA Secretary-General Michel Zen-Ruffinen has submitted a written statement to back up allegations of financial irregularities and iron-handed management he levelled at FIFA President Sepp Blatter.

Football's world governing body said in a statement Tuesday that Zen-Ruffinen had refused to withdraw the allegations and had met a deadline set by Blatter to supply written details by Tuesday night.

"The Secretary-General informed the President that he refused to retract his allegations," said the statement.

"However, he confirmed that, as he had already announced, he would comply with the president's wishes and provide the FIFA Executive Committee, in its capacity as the controlling body, with all the relevant facts and evidence at its meeting in Zurich on May 3."

Zen-Ruffinen, a lawyer and former referee who ensures the day-to-day management of FIFA and the competitions it organises, was quoted in the Swiss press earlier this month criticizing the "Blatter system" put in place in 1998 when Blatter was elevated from the post of secretary-general to president.

Blatter had bypassed standard financial checks, flaunting internal rules, Zen-Ruffinen alleged.

His accusations come against a backdrop of increasing division within football's world governing body as Blatter prepares to face a challenge to his presidency next month from African football supremo Issa Hayatou.

Blatter on Tuesday hit out at what he described as a hate campaign against him in the build-up to the presidential election on May 29.

Blatter made a written reply to an attack by UEFA boss and old adversary Lennart Johansson on him in a letter to European federations.

Johansson, the long-serving head of European football's governing body, said Blatter was seeking to slash the number of World Cup places given to the continent as a tactic in his bid to be re-elected FIFA president.

Johansson, a key backer of Hayatou who was instrumental in persuading the Cameroonian official to stand against Blatter, said Blatter's tactics were intolerable.

Blatter replied that he had consistently tried to foster unity within the federation.

He spoke of the Goal programme, the 10 million dollars of aid over four years to UEFA, who, Blatter added, has never revealed what they have done with the money.

Blatter said the money-for-votes allegations linked to his successful presidential campaign four years ago were "without proof."

"What has happened is that an artificial, negative climate of defamation has been created by the media," Blatter said.

"And now I have the responsibility of cleaning up the business by calling in a Mr Clean who will organize everything in a new era of honest dealings between gentlemen."

"It's my vision of a strong and pro-active FIFA which is found threatening," Blatter said.

Sorry, wrong toilet!

AFP, *London*

Use of the referee's toilet brought about a two-week fine for Leicester City midfielder Robbie Savage before Saturday's Premiership clash against Aston Villa.

Official Graham Poll was furious after the Wales international made use of his facilities without asking at Leicester's home match which ended in a 2-2 draw.

Poll reported his antics to the English Football Association after the midfielder broke a rule which says a player cannot enter the referee's dressing room without permission.

Now Leicester have conducted their own investigation into Savage's behaviour and have hit him in the pocket with the heaviest fine they are allowed to hand out.

A Leicester spokesman confirmed: "Robbie Savage has been fined the maximum permissible two weeks' wages as a result of an incident which took place before Saturday's game with Aston Villa.

"Leicester City were made aware of the incident on Saturday evening by match referee Graham Poll and then conducted their own investigation. The club has spoken with Robbie Savage and communicated the decision to him."

Savage could also face an improper conduct charge from the FA. A spokesman said: "We can confirm we are examining the referee's report concerning an incident involving Robbie Savage."

Chievo boss loves Baggio

AFP, *Milan*

Chievo president Luca Campedelli admits he would love Brescia's Roberto Baggio to lead his club in next year's Champions League - if the minnows from Verona finish fourth in *Serie A* this term, Corriere dello Sport reported Wednesday.

Baggio, 35, is very much the man of the moment in Italy. His return ahead of schedule from injury on Sunday saw him score two goals against Fiorentina in a 20-minute substitute appearance and it seems everyone in Italy - except national team coach Giovanni Trapattoni - wants him to go to the World Cup.

With Brescia still fighting against relegation and Chievo not yet certain of fourth place Campedelli said he would bide his time before moving for Baggio but said: "We need to wait although maybe just for a week - then we will make an evaluation.

"Let's leave the door open, in football no possibility is excluded, never say never."

Campedelli heaped superlatives on Baggio who has already been compared to Diego Maradona, Buddha and Nelson Mandela this week by various observers.

The Anglophile, a shareholder in Manchester United, Celtic and Sunderland who also claims to follow the fortunes of Leyton Orient and Preston North End, said that Baggio had the same kudos with his team-mates as late Scotland skipper Billy Bremner did with Leeds or Nobby Stiles did with Manchester United.

"Someone like Baggio should be preserved by Unicef, the WWF or Unesco," said Campedelli. "Like an artistic heritage."

UEFA against Israel suspension

AFP, *Stockholm*

UEFA president Lennart Johansson rejected a request by a handful of Arab states to suspend Israel, it was revealed on Wednesday's second day of the executive committee meeting of European football's governing body.

UEFA's stance matches that of their world counterparts FIFA who have, like UEFA, sent a study commission to each official match involving Israel.

"We are going to studying the situation game by game. We will decide whether a match should go ahead or not case by case," said Swede Johansson. "I don't think it's necessary to suspend Israel and our decisions will reflect those of the United Nations."

Jordan, Syria, Oman, Libya and Kuwait were the five arab countries calling for the suspension of Israel because of the Middle East conflict.

Italian Cup final

Juve, Parma to field reserves

AFP, *Turin*

Juventus and Parma meet on Thursday in a low-key Italian Cup Final first leg match with both sides likely to field second choice line-ups as they have their minds on other more important targets.

However a decent turn-out is assured with some 25,000 tickets already sold for a match in a stadium which is so frequently deserted by the Juve faithful that the Turin club recently floated the idea they may quit Turin.

The reason for both teams apathetic attitude is that Juventus are in with a real chance of winning the Italian first division title while Parma are perilously close to relegation.